

CROSS-BORDER SOCIAL DIALOGUE AND AGREEMENTS: **An emerging global industrial relations framework?**

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Preface

Many multinational companies have adopted corporate codes of conduct that have social provisions. In some industrial countries, in fact, most multinationals have such codes. Yet there is concern that these codes, important as they are, may not translate into actual improvements in workers' rights and employment conditions. Indeed, these private initiatives often lack the kinds of monitoring mechanisms needed to ensure that social provisions are implemented in practice. Moreover, these codes are primarily a management tool, and are not negotiated with workers. In this sense, they do not deal with the fundamental difference that exists between the scope of the firm – which operates on a global scale – and workers, whose voice is expressed in a fragmented manner, in the different countries where the multinational operates.

It is in this context that new initiatives have emerged, namely international framework agreements (IFAs), which constitute the focus of this volume. In contrast to traditional corporate codes of conduct, IFAs are instruments negotiated with global trade unions. The purpose of IFAs is to stimulate global social dialogue between the multinational and the representatives of workers – that is, both where the firm is headquartered and where it operates. IFAs also aim at promoting compliance with International Labour Organization core labour standards.

This volume represents the first comprehensive overview of IFAs. It covers the 62 IFAs that existed at the end of 2007 (compared with virtually none in the early 1990s and about 20 five years ago); provides a detailed analysis of how the agreements operate in practice; examines the extent to which IFAs pave the way for cross-border industrial relations;

looks at the legal dimensions of IFAs, including recent case law on the related issue of cross-border industrial action; analyses factors that explain why there are few IFAs in two sectors (textiles, clothing and footwear; and maritime transport); and explores the options for international policy action.

More fundamentally, the volume represents a major step in understanding the possibilities for developing cross-border industrial relations, and has garnered contributions from some of the top international experts in the field. Earlier versions of their contributions were discussed at a workshop of the International Institute for Labour Studies, held on 15–16 December 2006 in Geneva.

This is a fascinating project of the Institute, and one that calls for follow-up. The next stages will involve assessments of IFAs' impact on actual working conditions and of their effectiveness vis-à-vis the policy goals of the International Labour Organization.

Raymond Torres

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